

St. Nicolas C of E Academy OPAL play policy

1. Commitment

St. Nicolas undertakes to refer to this play policy in all decisions that affect children's play. Our school is committed to providing the strategic and operational leadership needed to provide and maintain quality play provision for all of our children.

2. Rationale

St. Nicolas believes that all children need opportunities to play that allow them to explore, manipulate, experience and affect their environment. We believe play provision should be welcoming and accessible to every child, irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, economic or social circumstances, ethnic or cultural background or origin, or individual abilities.

The OPAL Primary Programme rationale is that *"... better, more active and creative playtimes can mean happier and healthier children, and having happier, healthier, more active children usually results in a more positive attitude to learning in school, with more effective classroom lessons, less staff time spent resolving unnecessary behavioural problems, fewer playtime accidents, happier staff and a healthier attitude to life."*

At St. Nicolas, play is an essential part of how we live out our vision and mission. Rooted in our Christian ethos and inspired by the Parable of the Sower, we believe play provides the "rich soil" in which children can grow and flourish. Through play, children develop curiosity, creativity, resilience, and respect for themselves, others, and the environment. Play nurtures deep roots of confidence and adaptability, enabling every child to discover their unique strengths and talents. In creating joyful, inclusive, and abundant opportunities for play, we help ensure that, together, we flourish.

3. Definition and value of play

Play is defined as a process that is intrinsically motivated, directed by the child and freely chosen by the child. Play has its own value and provides its own purpose. It may or may not involve equipment or other people.

We believe play has many benefits, including:

- Play is critical to children's health and wellbeing, and essential for their physical, emotional, social, spiritual and intellectual development.
- Play enables children to explore the physical and social environment, as well as different concepts and ideas.
- Play enhances children's self-esteem and their understanding of others through freely chosen social interactions, within peer groups, with individuals, and within groups of different ages, abilities, interests, genders, ethnicities and cultures.
- Play requires ongoing communication and negotiation skills, enabling children to develop a balance between their right to act freely and their responsibilities to others.



- Play enables children to experience a wide range of emotions and develop their ability to cope with these, including sadness and happiness, rejection and acceptance, frustration and achievement, boredom and fascination, fear and confidence.
- Play encourages self-confidence and the ability to make choices, problem solve and to be creative.
- Play maintains children's openness to learning, develops their capabilities and allows them to push the boundaries of what they can achieve.

Play is what children do when they choose their own activities and follow their own ideas. It is fun, imaginative, and can be quiet or noisy, active or restful, messy or creative. Through play, children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. It helps them to grow in confidence, develop new skills, and build friendships, while also giving them the freedom to explore, take risks, and enjoy being children.

Through play, children experience and live out our Christian values in meaningful ways. Play provides opportunities to show compassion and friendship, to learn peace and thankfulness, and to practise perseverance when faced with challenges. It encourages service by working together and supporting others, and nurtures hope as children explore, imagine, and create their own possibilities. In this way, play is woven into our vision, mission, and motto, helping every child to flourish.

4. Aims

In relation to play St. Nicolas aims to:

- Ensure play settings provide a varied, challenging and stimulating environment where children can persevere, show hope in new possibilities, and grow in confidence.
- Allow children to take risks with wisdom and courage, using a common-sense approach to manage risks while appreciating the value of thankfulness and trust.
- Provide opportunities for children to build relationships founded on compassion, friendship, and peace.
- Enable children to develop respect for their surroundings and for one another, showing service and gratitude in caring for God's creation.
- Support children's physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual development, encouraging them to flourish through perseverance and hope.
- Provide environments that inspire imagination, creativity, and thankfulness, where children can explore with joy and curiosity.
- Create spaces that nurture learning across the curriculum and promote an understanding of God's world through awe, wonder, and service.
- Encourage both independence and teamwork, rooted in friendship and compassion.
- Build emotional and physical resilience, supported by the values of perseverance and hope.

5. Rights

As a Rights Respecting School, with children's rights embedded across our curriculum, we recognise the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes every child's right to play, recreation, and leisure (Article 31) and their right to be listened to on matters that are important to them (Article 12). We take these rights seriously and are committed to ensuring children's



voices shape their play experiences, creating opportunities that reflect their views, needs, and aspirations.

6. Benefit and risk

'Play is great for children's wellbeing and development. When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits. No child will learn about risk if they are wrapped in cotton wool.'

Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012)

The school will use the Health and Safety Executive guidance document *Children's Play and Leisure – Promoting a Balanced Approach (September 2012)* as the principal value statement informing its approach to managing risk in play. In doing so, the school will adopt a risk-benefit approach as detailed in *Managing Risk in Play Provision: An Implementation Guide (Play Safety Forum, 2012)*. See Appendix 1

Risk-taking is an essential feature of play provision and of all environments in which children legitimately spend time at play. Play provision aims to offer children the chance to encounter acceptable risks as part of a stimulating, challenging and managed play environment. As outlined in the play sector publication 'Best Play', play provision should aim to *'manage the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children and young people safe from harm'*.

In addition to standard risk-benefit assessments the school will practice dynamic risk management with children, encouraging them to identify and manage risks in an environment where adults are present to support them.

At St. Nicolas, we believe that experiencing risk and challenge through play is an important part of helping children to flourish. By allowing children to explore challenges, take risks, and persevere when things are difficult, we nurture enquiring minds, a spirit of curiosity, and respect for themselves, others, and the environment. In this way, risk and challenge in play support children in developing the deep roots they need to thrive in an ever-changing world, while living out our values of hope, perseverance, and friendship.

7. Supervision

The law requires that children in school have supervision but for primary school playtimes there are no stated ratios. During the school day there should be one or more adults present outdoors. The school recognises OPAL's three models of supervision: Direct, Remote and Ranging. Except for new children in reception, whose skills and orientation in the school environment need to be assessed, the school does not believe direct supervision is possible or beneficial. Supervisors will use ranging and remote supervision models, so that children can quickly find an adult and adults can patrol large sites to gain an awareness of the kinds of play and levels of risk likely to be emerging.

At St Nicolas, the playground and field are divided into eight zones across three playgrounds and the field, ensuring that play is safe, stimulating, and well supported. Each zone will have a designated play leader responsible for ranging within their area, enabling children to access adults quickly if needed while also giving them the freedom to explore and enjoy a wide variety of play opportunities. This approach ensures effective supervision while respecting children's right to play independently and take responsibility for their own choices.



8. The adult's role in play

The school will help children maximise the benefits they can gain from play by the provision of trained staff who are informed by and work in accordance with the Playwork Principles. Staff will use and refer to these principles when appropriate interventions are needed and ultimately will strive for facilitating an environment that nurtures children's self-directed play.

The playworker's core function is to create an environment that will stimulate children's play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. A skilled and experienced playworker is capable of enriching the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resources of the physical environment and in terms of the attitudes and culture fostered within the play setting. Playworkers are a channel of access to new materials and tools and they can act as a stimulus to children to explore and learn. They are also available to participate in the play if invited.

Examples of this may include:-

Creating stimulating environments – A playworker sets up a range of loose parts such as tyres, crates, fabric, and natural materials, encouraging children to build, experiment, and use their imagination in open-ended ways.

Encouraging safe risk-taking – A playworker provides climbing opportunities, balancing beams, and tree stumps, supporting children to challenge themselves physically while using a common-sense approach to safety.

Fostering positive attitudes and culture – A playworker models respect, kindness, and inclusion, ensuring every child feels welcome, valued, and confident to take part, while embedding the school's Christian values and children's rights.

Providing access to tools and new experiences – A playworker introduces resources such as den-building kits, water play equipment, or gardening tools, showing children how to use them safely and inspiring curiosity about the natural world.

Being responsive to children's play – A playworker observes from a distance, ready to step in if support is needed, and joins in a game only when invited, helping to extend the play experience without taking ownership away from the children.

See Appendix 1: Playwork Principles.

9. Equality and diversity

Through providing a rich play offer meeting every child's needs we will ensure all children, regardless of age, gender, race, disability or other special needs, can develop and thrive, build strong relationships and enjoy school.

10. Environment

We believe that a rich play setting should ensure that all children have access to stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable or unnecessary risks and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore for themselves through their freely chosen play.





We will strive to continually improve the quality and diversity of our school's grounds to enhance play. We will use the document 'Best Play' to guide us on what a quality play environment should contain. www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/pubs/bestplay.pdf

A rich play setting supports safeguarding by providing safe, inclusive spaces where children can explore and take risks responsibly. It helps children grow in confidence as they work together, build friendships, and learn the value of teamwork. Play also encourages children to advocate for their own rights, while strengthening their social and emotional skills such as resilience, empathy, and problem-solving. By offering abundant opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, play fosters a deep connection with nature, laying strong foundations for children to respect and care for the environment as part of God's creation.

